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DATE 2/10/86DOC NO SOVA M 85-10217XOCR 3P&PD 1

Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

4 February 1986

POST-GENEVA: IS GORBACHEV'S US POLICY IN QUESTION?Summary

The Soviet leadership is in agreement on the central objective of its US policy--recreating a detente atmosphere in order to constrain US defense programs and gain access to our technology. [redacted] since the Geneva meeting in November suggest that some of Gorbachev's colleagues in the Soviet leadership may be questioning the pace of his steps to reopen a political dialogue with the US and his failure to exact a higher price for moderating Moscow's stance on the Reagan Administration.

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-- [redacted] high level differences over interpreting the significance of the meeting.

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-- Several Soviet leaders and journalists have taken a pessimistic position on the prospects for a new beginning in the US-USSR relationship that contrasts markedly with Gorbachev's upbeat assessment following the meeting. [redacted]

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Reports of resistance to Gorbachev are subject to several different--but not necessarily contradictory--interpretations:

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- They could be orchestrated to gain leverage on the US by suggesting Gorbachev is under pressure to hold firm on Soviet negotiating positions.
- Gorbachev's opponents may be contriving reservations about his US policy to slow his political momentum.
- There may be real concerns in the leadership that conciliatory Soviet gestures in the absence of a clear US quid pro quo will weaken Moscow's bargaining position, legitimize the President's approach toward dealing with Moscow and undercut efforts to mobilize Western public opinion against US policy. [redacted]

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Whatever their motivation, signs of resistance to Gorbachev do not now pose a threat to him or his policies. His political opponents are too weak to mount an effective challenge, and he will be sure to protect his flanks through initiatives--such as the grandiose arms control program he recently unveiled--to keep the pressure on US policy.

Although some of his domestic allies may share reservations about his approach to the US, they are not likely to break ranks with him over tactics on an issue currently subordinate to domestic concerns. Over time, however, Gorbachev could come under pressure to demonstrate that any further steps he takes to improve atmospherics or facilitate successful follow on summits are providing concrete benefits for the Soviet Union. Perhaps more importantly, a breakdown in the dialogue and a reescalation of tensions in the relationship could provide Gorbachev's critics with an opening to attack his leadership. [redacted]

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Gorbachev's Gambit

[redacted] Mikhail Gorbachev has been a proponent of steps to reopen political dialogue with the US Administration since well before his election as General Secretary:

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- Within a month of his election, Gorbachev signaled interest in an early summit in a widely-publicized Pravda interview that failed to repeat previous Soviet arguments that progress on substantive issues must precede such a meeting.

Gorbachev evidently made a calculated decision to use the Geneva summit to engineer a new atmosphere:

- According to US officials, he was instrumental in steering the discussions toward a successful conclusion and resolving differences over the final joint statement.
- In the wake of the meeting, Gorbachev and other Soviet officials have described Geneva as a promising new start in the relationship. [redacted]

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Since the meeting, Gorbachev has cast the intentions of the Administration in a more favorable light, and evidently instructed his propagandists to follow suit:

- In a major statement on US-Soviet relations to the Supreme Soviet at the end of November, Gorbachev claimed to see signs of a favorable evolution in US policy and stated that the "realism" shown by the US side contributed to the positive results of the Geneva talks.
- The Soviet public has been introduced to a new image of the U.S. President better attuned to an effort to restore substantive dialogue. Soviet media have begun to give the President's statements more straightforward coverage, while saving their most tendentious commentaries for officials in the Administration that Moscow views as working against an expanding relationship. [redacted]

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Reports of High-level Differences

[redacted] since Geneva that there are high-level differences over Gorbachev's approach to the meeting, his upbeat assessment of the results, and the new treatment of the US President.

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- A Soviet diplomat reportedly acknowledged that the US had "won" the summit by shifting the focus from strictly arms control while giving away nothing on SDI. His comments suggest concern that Gorbachev's behavior at the summit could provide detractors with grounds to oppose his policy approach.

-- [redacted]

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[redacted] Gromyko had spoken critically in a Politburo meeting, saying that Gorbachev had gone beyond agreements made in the Politburo regarding Geneva. [redacted]

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Several statements by senior political and military leaders following Geneva also suggest some skepticism over the results and the wisdom of Gorbachev's attempts to put a new face on the relationship:

Politburo Statement. The traditional Politburo statement approving the Soviet delegation's activities at the summit was noticeably more cautious in tone than Gorbachev's initial characterization at the joint press conference (which was televised, unedited, within the USSR). Gorbachev's remarks stressed the prospects emerging from the summit--"I would assess the meeting as having created opportunities for progress"--and downplayed the failure to reach a major accord on arms control--"the process as a whole could not have been solved in these two days." In contrast, the Politburo statement downplayed atmospherics and emphasized arms control--particularly blocking space weaponry --as paramount to Soviet-American relations. It highlighted the joint statement's reaffirmation of the 8 January 1985 Shultz-Gromyko accord reopening arms talks as the centerpiece of the summit--a back-handed way of reasserting the centrality of SDI. [redacted]

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Shcherbitskiy. Ukrainian party chief Vladimir Shcherbitskiy in two speeches since Geneva has taken a noticeably harder line than Gorbachev on US intentions and the results of the Geneva meeting:

- At a Supreme Soviet session on 26 November, he charged that the United States "will in the future strive to attain military-strategic superiority over us and to deal with us not on the basis of equality but from a position of strength."
- He charged that the President's "recent speech to Congress, his unconvincing arguments and his attempts to justify his policy are clearly designed to deceive public opinion."
- In pointed remarks to a party conference in the Ukraine on 21 December, he cautioned that Geneva "provided no grounds for excessive illusions" because it did not settle the "fundamental problem." [redacted]

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Military Views.

[redacted] in conversations with US interlocutors that some senior military leaders also have reservations about Gorbachev's approach to relations with the US. A Soviet journalist who may have KGB contacts told US embassy officers in late November that the military shared the unhappiness of some other elements in the leadership with the results of Geneva.

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- Chief of the General Staff's Akhromeyev's Supreme Soviet speech, like Shcherbitskiy's, expressed skepticism about the US commitment to improved relations.

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- A call for US concessions on SDI was the centerpiece of the first major article by a senior military official after the summit (in Pravda by First Deputy Minister of Defense Petrov).

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A Defensive Tone After Geneva. While he has not changed course, Gorbachev's remarks since the summit have been noticeably more defensive, a possible reaction to less than wholehearted endorsement back home:

- His speech to the Supreme Soviet was dominated by a lengthy rationale for his opening to the US and his tone on the outcome of the talks was more reserved than his comments in Geneva.

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Gorbachev associates, moreover, have made several unusually explicit allusions to internal skeptics:

- In a recent speech in Minsk, Premier Ryzhkov cautioned against "belittling" the meeting's results.
- A 27 November article in the weekly Literaturnaya Gazeta by prominent journalist Fedor Burlatskiy also appears to have been taking aim at Gorbachev's Politburo critics. Referring to the summit, Burlatskiy maintained: "What has been achieved is the maximum possible in today's difficult period in international relations. Only naive simpletons or demagogues can ask for more." In a subsequent TV broadcast, Burlatskiy went on to caution against "those who will not give up the temptation to interpret the results of the meeting in a primitive way, as a victory of one side and defeat of the other."

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Interpreting Reports of Resistance to Gorbachev

Reports of resistance to Gorbachev on foreign policy matters are subject to several different--but not necessarily contradictory--interpretations. Information is sketchy, and the potential for deception is high. At least three explanations appear plausible:

A Negotiating Ploy. The Soviets know, based on past experience, that portraying Gorbachev as under pressure from conservative elements in the Soviet leadership could improve their bargaining position in negotiations with the US. Gorbachev and some of his associates have made a point of alluding to pressures from the military establishment on Gorbachev over the last few months, and they may have made a calculated decision to picture the General Secretary as under pressure following the summit as well:

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Political Intrigue. As in any government, political positions expressed by Soviet leaders are not always a reliable guide to their policy views.

- Stalin attacked Trotskiy's proposals for an accelerated effort to collectivize agriculture in the 1920's, but pushed ahead ruthlessly with such a program following his consolidation of power.
- In the struggle to succeed Stalin, Khrushchev attacked Malenkov for giving consumer goods priority over heavy industry, but promptly adopted the same position after Malenkov had been defeated.

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The remaining members of the Brezhnev old guard probably believe that attacks on Gorbachev's initiatives toward the US could be an effective means of countering the General Secretary's political momentum. They probably hope to build political support among a party elite--including some of Gorbachev's allies--who have a political interest in restraining his power and who traditionally have been hostile to conciliatory gestures toward the US.

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Differences over Political Tactics. The reports may also reflect authentic differences within the top leadership over the timing and tactics of Gorbachev's moves to resume a political dialogue

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with the US Administration. There appears to be agreement on the central objective--to try to recreate early 1970's style detente to constrain US defense programs and gain access to US trade and technology. [redacted]

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[redacted] Gromyko, former Defense Minister Ustinov, and senior leaders of the party's sprawling regional apparatus such as Shcherbitskiy have resisted Moscow's steps toward substantive engagement, out of concern that such a change in course would be perceived as a sign of Soviet weakness.

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- Proponents of this philosophy may have objected specifically to Gorbachev's decision to settle for improved atmospherics and to agree to follow-on summits without more of a quid pro quo.
- They could find common ground with military leaders eager to maintain pressure on the US to end SDI and, more generally, concerned that lessening of tensions will reduce their leverage in the competition for resources.
- Some might argue that Gorbachev's approach has undermined the Soviet bargaining position and legitimized the US approach in recent years to the conduct of US-Soviet relations. [redacted]

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Whatever the particular motivations involved, President Gromyko would be a logical rallying point for those who question Gorbachev's current tactics toward the US. His writings, as well as his past negotiating behavior, suggest that he believes the Politburo's main advantage in dealing with the US is a policy of unyielding firmness and long patience:

- He almost certainly would view Gorbachev's decision to yield on the joint statement and accept US language on disputed passages as unwise, unprofessional and misguided. [redacted]

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Prospects

In getting his colleagues' support, Gorbachev has probably held out the prospect that a change in the tone of Moscow's approach toward Washington will ultimately help constrain US defense programs and bring about an easing of controls over the export of technology needed to revitalize the Soviet economic system. He may have also argued that this approach would make it easier for Moscow to drive wedges between the US and its allies on a number of issues. Reservations from conservative elements about the timing and political price of Gorbachev's opening may persist, but do not now appear to provide a base for challenging his leadership. In the runup to the party congress that opens on

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25 February, Gorbachev has stepped up pressure on the old guard, the likely locus of any such resistance: he has already fired its nominal leader Viktor Grishin and is preparing the ground for an assault on Shcherbitskiy with media attacks on some of his close associates. [REDACTED]

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Gorbachev seems aware, moreover, of the longer term political risks associated with his approach, positioning himself for a change if circumstances dictate:

- He has been careful to insist publicly since Geneva that the success of renewed dialogue will now depend on changes in the US position, and the grandiose arms control program Gorbachev laid out as the arms talks resumed makes clear he will attempt to keep the pressure on.

- He will move aggressively to cultivate the West Europeans and opposition leaders in the US as well. [REDACTED]

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Even this carefully circumscribed opening to the US, however, may come under close scrutiny from the Soviet elite, who remain convinced that national security is grounded in military might and innately disposed against conciliatory gestures that could be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Gorbachev does not have a blank check for an opening to the US even from his political allies:

- His senior lieutenant Yegor Ligachev, for example, is believed by US Embassy contacts in Moscow to be a conservative force in the regime. He has warned in recent speeches against allowing the penetration of Western ideas--an inevitable side-effect of expanding US-Soviet contacts. [REDACTED]

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The new leadership is not likely to break ranks for now over an approach to the US that has so far come at small cost to the USSR. But over time Gorbachev may come under pressure to demonstrate that further steps he takes to improve the atmosphere of relations--or to engineer a successful follow-on summit--are having the desired effect on US policy. Perhaps more importantly, Gorbachev's critics would be sure to exploit a new breakdown in the US-Soviet dialogue or a reescalation of tensions in the relationship as an opening to mount a new attack on his leadership. [REDACTED]

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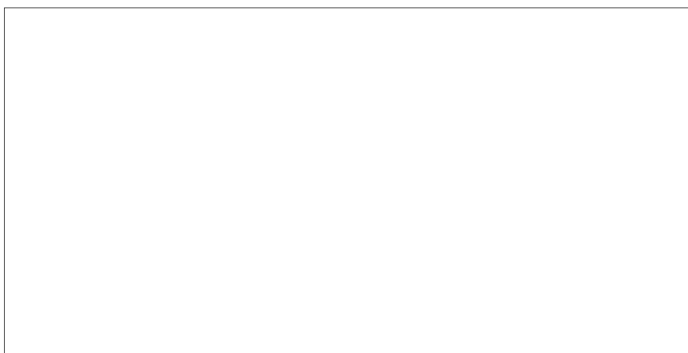
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